

Mullet on fly

by Ed Herbst

"The only artificial bait of any use in mullet-fishing is the fly. This may be either a tinselly 'coachman', or a fat white fly. The time for this fishing is sunset."

From Sea-fishing on the English Coast. FG Aflalo. 1891.

"Mullet feed on microscopic animal and plant foods and thus have no apparent angling value." Al McClane, McClane's New Standard Fishing Encyclopedia, Holt, Rinehart and Winston, New York, 1965.

I recently spent a few, too brief, days on Mahé Island, the largest of the Seychelles Islands. We stayed at a hotel between Anse Aux Pins and Anse Royale, about twenty minutes' drive from the airport. The beach looks out over about two kilometres of calm water in the lee of a coral reef. Within seconds I spotted the signs of feeding fish, virtually right up to the shoreline and often only metres from bathers. Moving to a higher vantage point, I was astonished to see shoals of grey fish with prominent eyes restlessly patrolling the area. They were about 14-16 inches long and there must have been hundreds of them for kilometre after kilometre along the beach. I had borrowed a friend's 8wt, three-piece Loomis and proceeded to cast a #12 Crazy Charlie at them. My girlfriend, who was spotting for me, said they were either spooked by the fly, or ignored it. In the rock pools at low tide I spotted tiny fish that would have been matched by a #16 gold ribbed hare's ear and lots of equally tiny crabs. I longed for my Scott, 6ft 10 inch one weight! Although the locals said they were mackerel, and fish which they called mackerel and which looked like the fish we saw in the water, were on sale at the Mahé market, Richard Schumann, who organises fly fishing tours in the region, suggested that they were mullet, as did David Levene. Any trout fisher finding themselves in knee-deep, crystal-clear water surrounded by hundreds of easy-to-spot 14 to 16 inch fish in sunny, windless conditions would assume that they had died and gone to heaven. No one bothers in this region, however, because they would rather spend their time stalking slightly bigger bonefish with eight and ten weight rods. I find this difficult to understand. I recall Dean Riphagen's description of a trip to New Zealand where he was walking up to ten kilometres a day searching for big browns of 6-10 lbs and averaging one fish a day at most because the conditions were difficult. He was fishing at the top end of South Island where the famous rivers experience tremendous fishing pressure but where, according to former CPS member, Richard Smithers, now living in Picton, there are "dozens" of Smalblaar-size streams that no one bothers about. When I asked Dean why he had not explored this option he said that one does not travel thousands of kilometres to catch one kilogram trout. It's a subjective issue but, in delightful surroundings, I would rather catch ten one-kilogram trout a day on a one weight rod than one eight pound trout on a 5/6 weight rod.

In the excellent book, *Salt Water Fly Fishing, Britain and Northern Europe* - by Paul Morgan and Friends (www.fishing.org/bonddu) the author devotes a chapter to mullet and says catching them on fly is a very hit-and-miss affair.

Someone who has devoted a lifetime to catching mullet in Durban harbour first on bait and then on fly, is Allen O'Connor. He studied stomach contents, sieved the sea bed on

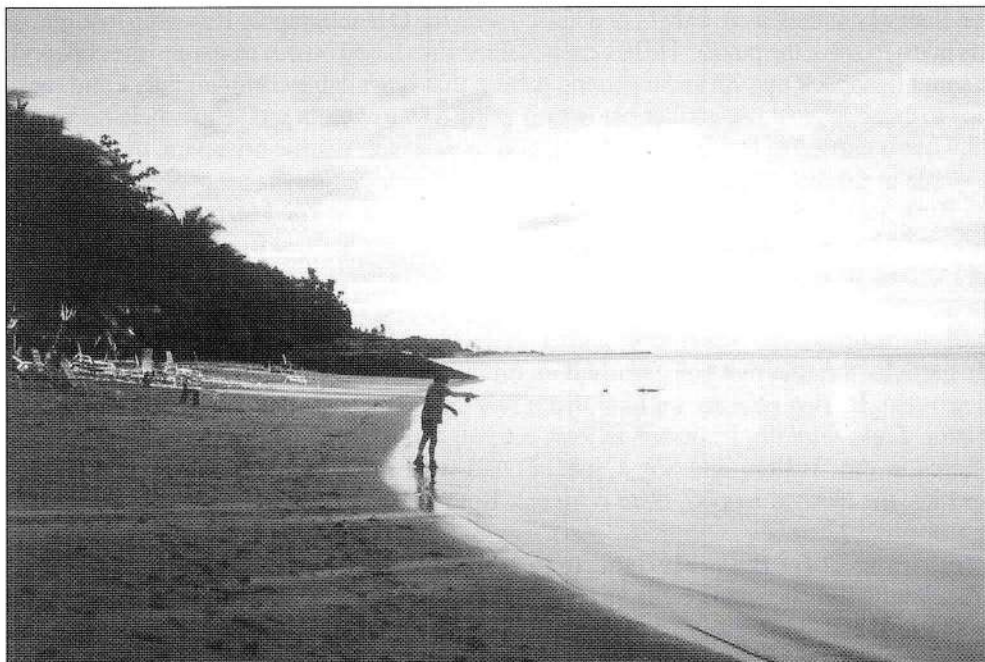
the flats where they were caught and liaised with the Oceanographic Research Institute in his quest to solve the puzzle. He has created three flies based on this research - the copepod, a small flashback nymph and a generic pattern that is available commercially - and reckons to catch at least two mullet per outing using a four-weight rod. The article he kindly sent me is carried in this issue. His imitation of the small marine organism, the copepod, a staple in the diet of mullet (See *A Guide to the Common Sea Fishes of Southern Africa* by Rudy van der Elst (Struik) and *Two Oceans - A Guide To The Marine Life of Southern Africa* - a magnificent David Philip publication) can be obtained from The Flyfisherman in Durban. (031 312-8029).

Not all the organisms available to mullet on the Cape Coast are minute however. Later in this article, the role that kelp, washed up on our coastline, plays in the diet of mullet is discussed. In *Two Oceans* we read that a two-centimetre, air-breathing Isopod, the Sea Slater, *Ligia dilatata*, "...occurs in vast congregations amongst drift kelp on the rocky shores in the Western and SW Cape." Found with it, and slightly larger, is a similar species, the Horned Isopod, *Deto echinata*. Both are dark brown.

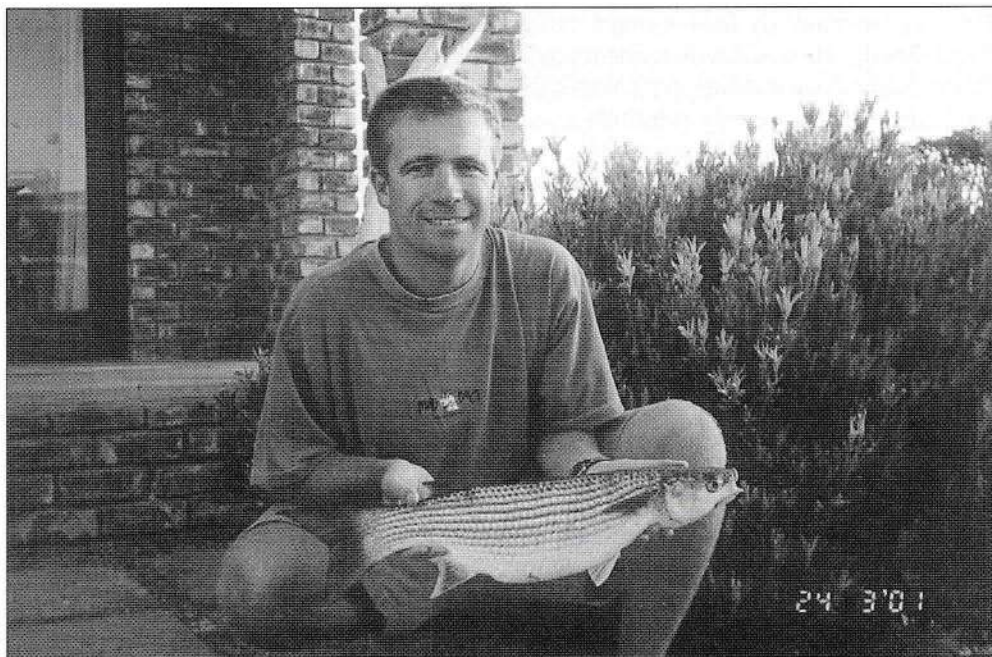
Proprietor of the Flyfisherman shops in Natal, Maitland Knott (maitland@flyfisherman.co.za), says his most successful method with mullet is to chum with bread and then cast a #16 pellet fly made from spun and clipped white deerhair into the chum. He makes the point, also made in Paul Morgan's book, that adding a flavouring of some sort - he recommends rubbing in some powdered yeast - dramatically improves the success rate.

Chad Hubbard of Bluewater Flies ties the commercially available version of Allen's flies. He says not many fly fishers target mullet, but that his pattern has been successful for those that do. He ties it with white thread on a # 14 chromed bait hook, and the body is Wapsi Super Brite dubbing in a colour called oyster with a shellback of antron fibres. For the latter you could easily substitute a mixture of nylon organza, pearl midge flash and phosphorescent Uni-Glo Yarn which is antron with a glow-in-the-dark capability. Chad said the mullet he has caught are extremely powerful and, "If you hook one on a five weight, you wish it was a seven weight."

Hooking them is not easy though - at least until someone conclusively cracks the code using the clues provided by Allen O' Connor's research. There are few people with a more impeccable fly fishing CV than CPS committee member, MC Coetzer. He has worked in a commercial trout hatchery, been a professional salt water fly fishing guide in Mozambique and run his own fly fishing shop. He has put a lot of effort into fly fishing for mullet on the Cape coast and says he has experienced far more frustration than success. He was very interested to hear of Allen O'Connor's flies because his experiments involved small Woolly Buggers and Gold Ribbed Hare's Ears. He uses a four-weight rod and five x tippet and says you are casting to fish about ten metres away usually around patches of water weed. He says the very soft, fleshy lips of mullet often result in the hook tearing away and that barbed hooks might be a solution. My suggestion was to use Roman Moser shock gum loops, a short piece of shock absorbing elastic with braided loops on either side (available from Sportfish in England (www.sportfish.com)). He said, however, that the bigger mullet can easily run a hundred metres on being hooked and it was simply the drag of the water against this length of line that pulled the hook free. MC



Fruitlessly flailing away. The editor tries to tempt mullet on Mahé Island in the Seychelles with an eight weight rod and a #12 Crazy Charlie.



Closer to home, David Falke with a mullet caught on fly at De Mond estuary near Bredasdorp.

points out that mullet can be found in all our local estuaries and lagoons such as Zandvlei, Milnerton and the Strand and that anyone who can find an effective method of catching them on fly is guaranteed excellent, easily available fly fishing.

MC says the three species found on the Cape coast are the harder, *Liza richardsonii* which when salted are known as "bokkom", *Liza tricuspidens*, the striped mullet and the bull-nosed mullet, *Mugil cephalus*. He says the striped mullet is the most aggressive taker of a fly and, like the harder, has been caught on prawn imitations by fly fishers targeting grunter. The bull-nosed mullet does not react to chum. According to van der Elst's book, the South African angling records for the three species are 0.5kg for harder, 2.7kg for striped mullet and 4.5 kg for bull-nosed mullet.

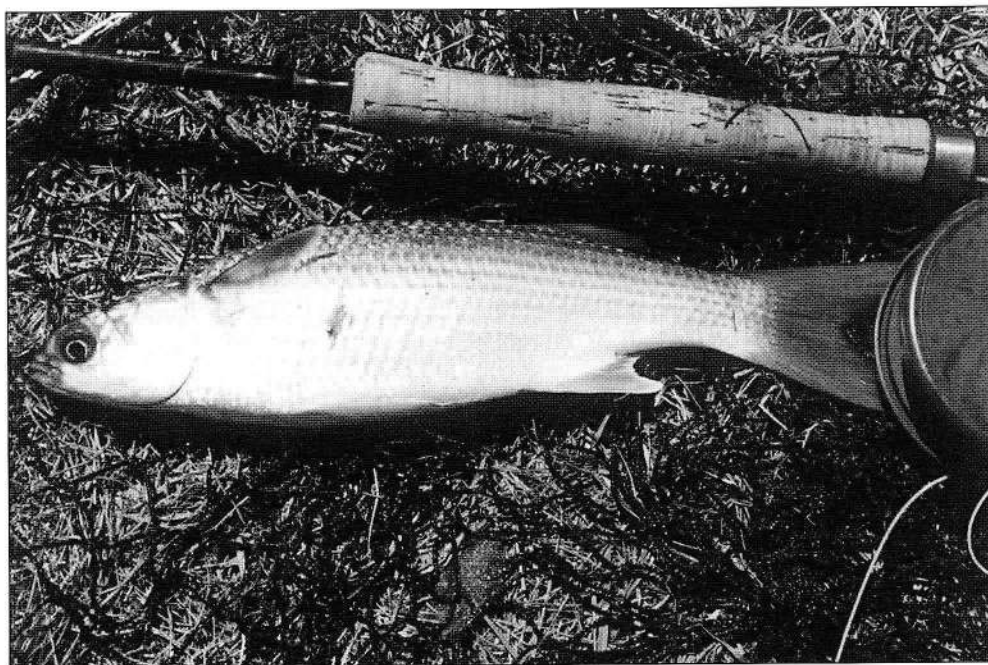
John Yelland of Ultimate Angling in Raapenberg Road, Mowbray, has hooked mullet at De Mond estuary but never landed one. He uses a five weight rod because he says the wind almost always blows there. He fishes to the weed patches within and around which the mullet congregate, using a green fly with a nylon weed guard. He says that on all the mullet he has hooked, the hook as pulled free, perhaps because he strikes too early.

CPS committee member and a scientist with the Department of Sea Fisheries, Dr Andy Cockcroft, suggests that a small Klinkhamer would work. Interestingly, he and another marine scientist, Dr Anton Bok of Port Elizabeth, who did his doctoral thesis on mullet, cite the efficacy of termites taken from the mound and threaded on a small hook and both believe that this might be because they have a strong scent.

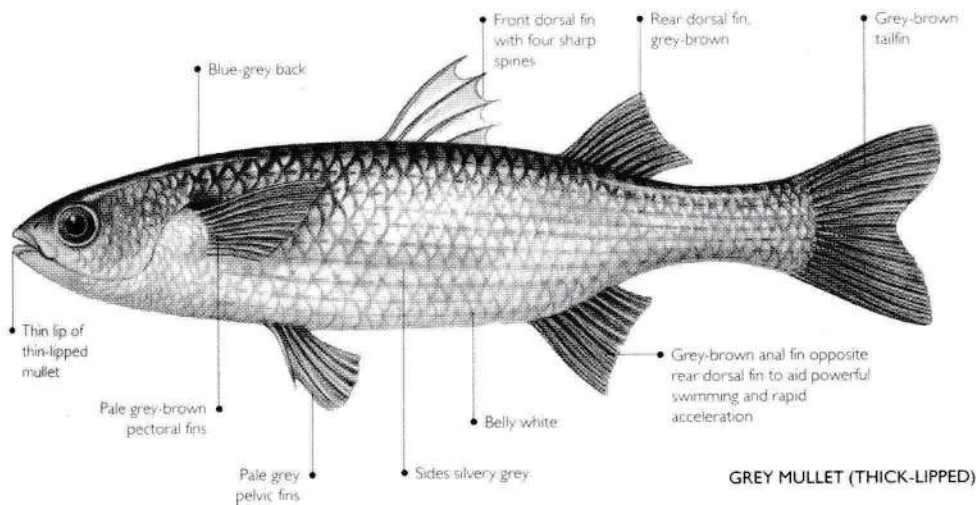
Another CPS member, Sean Mills, swears by a #16 Gold Ribbed Hare's Ear.

British biologist, Dr Malcolm Greenhalgh offers some intriguing fly tying possibilities in *The Complete Book of Fly Fishing* (Mitchell Beazley, London, 1998: ISBN 1 84000 048 1). "There are many species of mullet, and at least one can be found anywhere in the world in temperate or tropical inshore waters. They were once largely ignored by fly fishers, who dismissed them as baitfish, yet most species do grow to 2kg (4lb) or more, they will take a fly - although a different sort to most saltwater gamefish. And when hooked they are powerfully fast: so much so that today their reputation as a fly fishers' fish is rapidly growing. Mullet graze algae from the seabed and suck in mud to filter out tiny shrimp and worms. Because the mullet's food is so tiny, many fly fishers have considered them almost uncatchable on fly. (*What a challenge for midge maniacs!* - Editor). However, tiny weighted nymphs (hook size 16-18) presented in front of an advancing shoal of mullet can be hugely successful. In very shallow water, soft hackled spider wet flies sometimes score. So too, is a fly dressed to imitate lime-green *Enteromorpha* algae, of which mullet seem especially fond: use some sparse strands of lime-green mohair tied to a size 16 hook. This has caught many fish of more than 2kg (4lb). It is especially effective in estuaries where mullet can be seen rising to take wisps of *Enteromorpha* drifting in the flow. Of course, these tiny flies must be fished on fine nylon: a tippet of less than 2kg(4lb) breaking strain. Hooking a mullet is a challenge: playing one on such fine tackle really is exhilarating. However my own records suggest that, of 10 mullet that will take the fly, only six will be hooked, and only one will be landed."

As phosphorescence plays a more significant role in salt water creatures than fresh water



Mullet have the potential to open a new chapter in fly fishing on the Cape coast provided a successful means can be developed to tempt them on fly.



The British Thick Lipped Mullet from The Complete Book of Flyfishing by Malcolm Greenhalgh, Mitchell Beazley, London, 1998.

species, there is room for experiment here with glow-in-the-dark lime green flashabou, green fluorescent floss, peacock herl and white hen hackles dyed green.

Interestingly, in Paul Morgan's book on salt water fly fishing in Europe, several mullet flies using peacock herl are cited in #12 and 14 similar to that well known trout fly the Red Tag, i.e. red floss tag, peacock herl body and brown hackle. Tie this fly on a short shank # 18 or 20 hook, substitute green floss for red and a sparse hackle of dubbed green mohair for mobility and you would probably have a very effective mullet pattern.

One of the contributors to Morgan's book is Dr Mike Ladle, a biologist who says the key to excellent mullet fishing in British waters is the kelp fly, looking somewhat akin to the common house fly, that lays its eggs in rotting kelp. The result is white larvae by the millions that get swept out to sea at high tide and trigger a feeding frenzy by the mullet.

"On many of the world's coasts, kelp flies or seaweed flies are almost unbelievably abundant. For example, on the beaches of California it was estimated that a million tonnes of kelp are washed ashore each year and on a warm summer's day there could be as many as ten million kelp flies on every kilometre of shoreline. The maggots of these flies feed on the rotting seaweed and along the South coast of England they are equally abundant. This annual bonanza of seaweed fly maggots is just what the mullet ordered."

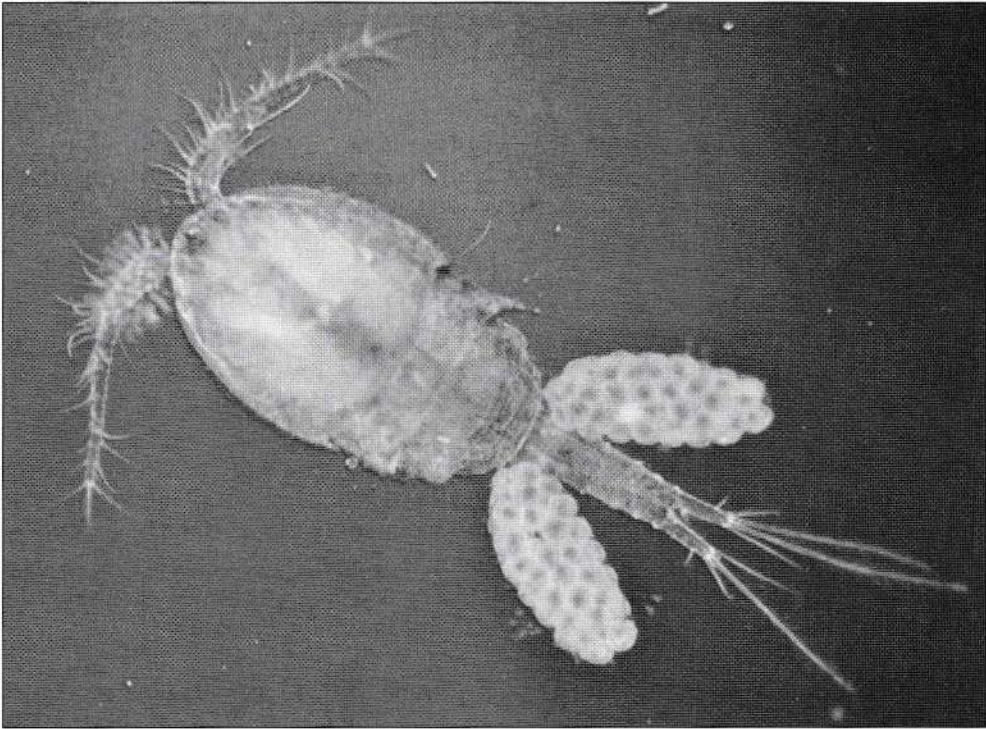
In the *Field Guide to Insects Of South Africa*, (Struik 2002) we read that our species of kelp fly are *Fucellia capensis* and *Coelopa africana* which resemble a small house fly: "...the most common fly on kelp, where it breeds, sometimes reaching nuisance levels. Larvae develop in wet kelp and other seaweeds, where they feed on exudates and mucus released by decay. They complete their life cycle before the next spring tide 28 days later. Adults present throughout the year, peaking in early winter when the largest amounts of kelp are beached."

(The quickest and easiest to construct imitation of these maggots comes in the form of a soft, latex grub available from Sportfish in England which has the right texture and can easily be threaded onto a #14 hook.)

A web search revealed some interesting articles on fly fishing for mullet, all from British fly fishers. At, www.chippyjersey.co.uk/mullet_on_the_fly.htm the author reveals that his most successful method, after a lot of experimentation, was dead-drifting peacock herl based trout and grayling flies at night. (This interested me because a friend, Emile Joubert, tells of catching a mullet at the Duiwenhoks River estuary on the Southern Cape coast at night using a small black nymph.)

"In the end we found methods that do work, and in the year 2002, we had over 500 mullet on the fly between 11lb and 10 lb, but the strangest thing is, that 90% of all the big fish came in the hours of darkness.

"Ok, so what did we learn? To cut a very long story short, the best retrieve is no retrieve. Yep, no retrieve, simple dead drifted flies work the best, in the flow and also tidal drift. We use a team of small wet flies, not unlike those used by freshwater trout anglers, and use the flow of water to control the speed of the flies in the water without creating drag.



A copepod, one of the several tiny creatures on which mullet prey.

This is important. Also a floating bob can be used about 6-10 inches from the point fly, as this helps to suspend that point fly at the depth at which these mullet feed, remembering we are talking about shallow water mullet.

"Best flies to start with are the Red Tag, and the Treacle Parkin. Both are traditional grayling patterns that just happen to attract the mullet."

I would think that as many of the organisms preyed on by mullet are pale white or tan there is potential here for an ethafoam-based floating fly using white, antron Glo Yarn and glow-in-the-dark saltwater flashabou in pearl white.

British professional fly fishing guide, Nick Hart, offers some interesting insights at www.hartflyfishing.demon.co.uk/mullet_fishing.html: "I use a rig called a New Zealand Dropper, basically a nymph hung below a dry fly. This method allows an angler to drift tiny nymphs amongst a shoal of unsuspecting fish employing an inconspicuous dry fly as the point on a long lightweight (4lb) leader. Connect directly to the bend of this (using a blood knot) a further piece of nylon. This will support your fishing fly, which can be any tiny nymph, gold head or killer bug style fly. The rig is then cast to a shoal and depending on the length of dropper from the hook, the small fly sinks to a given depth. The idea is that with limited casting a small morsel of food can be suspended amongst a feeding shoal of Mullet. Don't worry if they swim around it, they will 99 % of the time! But, every now and then your dry disappears, pulled from the surface by the lips of a hungry fish. If you are vigilant and wear good polaroids you will often see this all taking place

before your very eyes. Extremely exciting!

Strike as you would when dry fly fishing or inducing a take using nymphs and once again, hang on! The secret behind this method is that it plays on the mullet's habits as a particle feeder. Sifting masses of silty sludge from the bottom and the water around I believe they fall foul of this technique through routine forced habit. The same method works very well on trout feeding on buzzer pupa.

"Also be aware of weed mats on coastal shores and the food that hides beneath them. During certain tides, and this will depend very much upon location, the mats are lifted and thousands of shrimps, sea weed maggots, sand hoppers and various other goodies are washed up with the tide. On a good day the mullet will go crazy. I target these fish with a small gold head damselfly, made using a drab olive marabou. Watch a pod of fish feeding away with frequent popping sounds at the surface and aim a cast at the leader of the pack (the rest will be following like sheep!), giving a good few feet of lead. As they near your trap, spring it to life with six inch strips and if you are lucky, get ready for a heart-stopping follow and rod-wrenching take."

So here you have it. Small flies in white, tan/brown or green, fished on the incoming tide during the day or night, dead-drift or stripped. All the authors make the point that, in daylight, mullet are exceptionally wary fish that spook easily and fluorocarbon tippets are recommended. If, at the onset of winter, you can find a situation where the larvae of kelp flies are being washed out to sea on a rising tide, you might strike the sort of bonanza of which Dr Mike Ladle writes. On his website, (www.mikeladle.com), he writes of how he developed a "dry" fly with which to fish these maggots.

"The natural progression in dry fly fishing for mullet, in view of our problems with 'drowned' flies, was to make permanent floaters. At first we simply picked up a few granules of polystyrene from a handy piece of flotsam and threaded them on the hook shank. A bunch of ordinary, commercially produced maggots was placed on the bend. The numbers of mullet taken on fly leapt sharply on the introduction of this refinement. The foam was, in fact, a bit of a nuisance and was easily flicked off the hook during casting or, on occasions, it slid over the eye of the hook and up the tippet. Polystyrene on the hook is clearly a newer version of an old idea, for 'cork maggots' were used in freshwater fishing many years ago. It was only a short step from fragments of polystyrene to the use of modern polyethylene foam (ethafoam), which is much tougher and more durable than polystyrene. With a minimum number of whippings at either end, a neat and permanently floating 'maggot fly' can be created.

"Ideally, the maggot fly would be used without the adornment of real maggots, which soon die when exposed to seawater. Experience has shown however that, just as the mullet had avoided our original dry flies, they are perfectly capable of distinguishing a polyethylene maggot, however realistic, from the genuine article.

"The ability of these fish to discern small objects is verified in other ways. The finest tippet which it is practical to use (5- to 6-pounds B.S.) is easily visible to the surface-feeding fish. Frequently they will cruise towards a tippet lying on the surface and submerge within inches of it, only to resurface on the other side. Even a fly line 'false cast' well above the heads

of the feeding fish will often be greeted by a violent flourish of activity as they disperse.

"To obtain the best results it is necessary not only to bait the fly with maggots, but also to replace the maggots every half-dozen casts or after every missed bite. Similarly, mullet are easily frightened by the presence of an angler on the shore - melting away like magic should the angler disturb them in any way by a sudden movement, or even by his shadow falling on the water. The original hooks used ranged from size fourteen to about size six, eyed and bronzed, fly hooks."

British fly fishers have found that threading a maggot onto the barb of the fly substantially increases the success rate and this and the use of chum such as bread flakes raises ethical questions. In his book Paul Morgan writes: "I know of anglers who have taken mullet on white, wool-bodied flies impregnated with the flavour of mackerel guts. I have not had time to pursue this myself, but expect to see progress made with absorbent flies and attractor scents."

In an e-mail from New Zealand, former CPS member, John Taunton Clarke, writes of catching mullet on the Cape coast as a boy using a small white grub pattern - but with inconsistent success. In a clear manifestation of what the fly fishing purists would regard as a misspent youth, he adds: "As I recall we first got the mullet in a feeding mood by throwing sand-fleas into the water."

As I have said, such practices and the use of bait on a fly are controversial. Back in 1888, in *The Book of the All-round Angler*, John Bickerdyke seems to have expressed these reservations: "A gentle (maggot) placed on a hook might be cast as a fly with success, provided a few gentles were thrown among the fish, to make them feed on that bait. I have not tried the experiment ..."

Paul Morgan sees it differently: "Chumming or ground-baiting, the use of scent or flavouring agents on flies, and the combined use of bait and flies are frowned on in almost all freshwater situations. Indeed, in most circumstances they are prohibited or even illegal. Fishing in the salt has not attracted the same restrictive legislation. Nor does it generally have the same problems of conservation. Any legal method is legitimate, and the combination of some of these methods with fly fishing provides exciting new avenues for exploration. If the use of scent, or added bait, on artificial flies enables the capture of otherwise difficult or impossible species of fish, it widens the scope of sporting fly fishing, and is a welcome progression."

In this regard I merely wish to point out that that fly fishing icon, Frank Sawyer, always used to rub his pheasant tail nymphs down the flanks of trout he caught and Dave Whitlock advocates rubbing nymphs against the underside of stream rocks to remove the scent of head cement and other synthetic products.

Professor Charles Griffiths of the Department of Zoology at the University of Cape Town, one of the co-authors of *Two Oceans*, was interested in the concept of developing a sport fishery for mullet in the Seychelles saying that trek netters had substantially reduced the stocks of mullet in all the estuaries on the western Cape Coast.

